



**Testimony before the Joint Committee on Government Administration and Elections
Opposing SB 839 and SB 840
March 16, 2009**

Good afternoon Senator Slossberg and Representative Spallone. My name is Alicia Woodsby and I am the Public Policy Director for the Connecticut chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI-CT). I am here today to testify in opposition to SB 839, An Act Concerning Mergers and Consolidations of Various State Agencies, and SB 840, An Act Concerning the Elimination of the Office of Consumer Counsel, the Office of the Healthcare Advocate, Office of the Ombudsman for Property Rights and Certain Legislative Commissions. We oppose these two bills because they would eliminate two state offices that offer critical protection to children, youth and adults that are essential to the mental health community. As the Director of Public Policy for NAMI-CT, I know just how critical independent advocates can be for individuals and families struggling to navigate and obtain services from the mental health system in Connecticut.

We oppose SB 839 because it guts and all but eliminates the Office of the Child Advocate, saving only Jeanne Milstein and transferring her position to the Attorney General's Office. Among many other vital charges, the Child Advocate is there to represent families and children who experience steep challenges to accessing services in the children's mental health system. Whenever there are serious problems for children in CT, whether related to out-patient or in-patient settings, residential treatment settings, or transitioning from the DCF system to the adult mental health system, the Child Advocate is there to help ensure that the system provides families with the health, welfare and stability they need as they navigate the children's mental health system. NAMI-CT has worked closely with the Child Advocate in recent years on legislation to improve the transition of young adults with mental illness from the children's to the adult's systems of care. We also rely on the Child Advocate to investigate incidents of abuse related to the children's mental health system. No other non-partisan entity in the state performs these functions. If the Child Advocate were pared down to only one employee, it would be impossible to offer the same necessary services to families in Connecticut. If SB 839 passes, the Child Fatality Review Board could not be sustained and in all likelihood, children's deaths in CT would go uninvestigated as scarce resources will be used elsewhere.

The Child Advocate's Office has been at the forefront of exposing problems with the use of restraints and seclusion on children as well as instances of children being pepper sprayed, both at Riverview, the state's psychiatric hospital for children. The Child Advocate has also investigated serious problems at residential treatment centers for children and the CT Juvenile Training School. I urge you to consider the vital services and protections that the Child Advocate offers this state, and consider the consequences that eliminating this office would have on children and families in need.

Similarly, we oppose SB 840 because it would eliminate the Office of the Healthcare Advocate. The Healthcare Advocate provides protection to many residents of Connecticut who are often left powerless as they attempt to access and navigate our healthcare insurance systems. NAMI-CT worked closely with the Healthcare Advocate to see that the Charter Oak Health Plan adheres to all of the state's consumer protection mandates, and ensure that the plan is consistent with our state's mental health parity law. When NAMI-CT receives calls from families who have exhausted typical channels of remedy and are still urgently trying to get care or treatment or assistance for their family members, we most often refer them to the Office of the Healthcare Advocate which most often results in positive outcomes. There is no other organization that offers this level of advocacy and protection for CT residents looking to access health care services

Both the Office of the Child Advocate and the Office of the Healthcare Advocate offer unique and much needed services to CT residents. We urge you not to eliminate their offices so that they can continue offering protection to those who need it most.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this matter.